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SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN SECURITY DETAINS AL-JAZEERAH BUREAU CHIEF, FOR ALLEGEDLY ERONEOUS REPORTS

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) The GOE detained Al-Jazeera's Cairo bureau chief, Hussain Abdel Ghani, in Dahab on April 26, where he was reporting on the recent Sinai terror bombings, on charges of disturbing the peace and spreading false information. (As of 1430 on April 27, Abdul Ghani remained under detention.) Al-Jazeera broke several controversial stories in the past few days. Al-Jazeera's initial reports on the April 24 Dahab bombings asserted that at least "100 people had been killed, wounded," which was initially interpreted by many here as 100 fatalities. (Current fatality counts range from 18-24.) Al-Jazeera also reported on April 26, in the immediate aftermath of the suicide attacks on the MFO in northern Sinai, that there had been yet another terror attack in Belbees, Sharqiya governorate. GOE spokesmen quickly denounced reports of violence in Sharqiya as false. Citing unnamed security sources, however, an AFP report noted that police in Belbees had exchanged fire with narcotics traffickers.

¶2. (SBU) GOE annoyance with Al-Jazeera reporting is not new. In May 2005, GOE security forces briefly detained eight members of an Al-Jazeera team as they attempted to cover a meeting of the Cairo Judge's Club. In November 2005, unknown assailants assaulted Al-Jazeera talk show host Ahmed Mansour outside his office. Although the Mansour assault was never definitively linked to the GOE, it was seen by many GOE critics as part of a pattern of assaults by plain-clothes thugs on journalists whose reporting has irked powerful elements within the GOE. A November 2004 assault by the then-editor of Al-Araby, Abdul Halim Qandil--which left Qandil battered and clad only in his underwear on the side of a desert highway--was the most prominent recent example of such assaults.

¶3. (SBU) Comment: Al-Jazeera coverage regularly upsets the GOE, which worries about its influence both domestically and across the Arab world. During a visit to Qatar several years ago, after a tour of the Al-Jazeera studio, President Mubarak cynically quipped, "All this trouble from a matchbox." The detention and investigation of Abdel Ghani suggests that, notwithstanding President Mubarak's 2004 pledge to eliminate jail time for journalists convicted of press offenses, there continue to be officials in the GOE who are willing to take a tough line with journalists whose reporting crosses certain vaguely-defined "red lines." End comment.

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